DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 409 CS 501 971

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TITLE Theatre Safari in East Africa: An Exploration of Theatre in Kenya.
PUB DATE Aug 77
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Theatre Association (Chicago, Illinois, August 14-17, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Acting; *African Culture; *African Literature; *Drama; Dramatics; Drama Workshops; Educational Needs; Fine Arts; Foreign Countries; *Production Techniques; *Theater Arts; Theaters; *Theoretical Criticism
IDENTIFIERS *Kenya

ABSTRACT

Six months of observation--at two universities, at a drama festival, and with several independent theatre companies--form the basis for this evaluation of theatre in Kenya, Africa. While Kenyan dramas deal with a variety of themes, the majority are topical rather than universal in their treatment of issues. In many, the emphasis is on the supernatural and on the conflict between the old and new forms of religion. Although the positive influence of the British educational system is acknowledged, this study illustrates how the traditional and innate African forms of theatre have been stifled. The paper indicates a need for secondary schools to stress that Kenyan dramatic origins within the tribal context are equal in importance to the literary classics of the western world. (MAI)

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Theatre Safari in East Africa

An Exploration of Theatre in Kenya

by

P. William Hutchinson

During the past year Kenya has been in the news quite frequently, as international affairs have taken some of America's top-ranking officials from Washington to Nairobi. Whenever these negotiations take place, there is usually news coverage from Embakasi Airport, and the accompanying film footage of President Jomo Kenyatta with his ceremonial flywhisk, the Kenyatta Conference Center and Hotel Hilton in downtown Nairobi, and the gazelles and wildebeests of the Kenyan game parks. During this same period of time the American television audience has also been treated to several special programs dealing with life in Kenya and focusing on the wild animals, the baobab trees, the "natives," and the contrasts of the old and the new. Also, of course, there are the Born Free films and television serials. Seldom, however, do we hear anything about Kenyan theatre.

Having been introduced to the idea of theatre in Kenya by John Driver, who was with the Open Theatre in the early 1970's, I decided to see for myself. This opportunity was afforded me in the spring of 1975, as part of my sabbatical study leave from Rhode Island College. Stimulated by the adventure of traveling half way around the globe, by the thought of learning more about African culture (having taught for three years at Tougaloo College in Mississippi), and by the exciting idea of getting away from the usual routine of teaching, directing and managing a college theatre program and

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trying instead to cope with a new set of cultural conditions, my family and I set off on our theatre safari at the end of January, 1975. For the next six months I explored the various levels of theatre in Kenya and discovered the fascinating relationship between Kenyan theatre and the multi-farious Kenyan lifestyles. The following report is a brief summary of that expedition and exploration.

My contact with college and university theatre came about primarily through my association with the theatre faculty at the University of Nairobi and at Kenyatta University College. In addition to teaching several seminar sessions dealing with contemporary European and American theatre, I observed theatre classes, workshops, and performances. Both the University and the College share the theatre faculty of the two institutions and parallel acting and directing assignments are given at each institution. These assignments culminate each term in a public performance on each campus, and the students from each institution attend on alternate weeks the performance of the other school. The students from each school work on some of the same scenes and improvisations; and in this way the faculty believes the students are better prepared to compare, contrast and evaluate the performances. On a given night the program would consist of two scenes from scripted plays, plus three scenes developed through improvisation (at which, incidentally, the students generally seemed to be quite facile). At the University an indoor stage was used for performances; at the College the performances were presented in an outdoor theatre setting. In both situations emphasis was placed on acting and directing; technical effects were minimized; and an informal workshop atmosphere prevailed. Some of the scenes were presented in English; some in Kiswahili; and the themes of the presentations varied from the meaning

of justice to the efficacy of political revolution, from the "wages" of alcoholism to the "agony and despair" of medical malpractice! The quality of these workshop performances--the acting, the blocking, and the direction in general--seemed to be better at the College than at the University; and the main reason for this difference may have been due to the emphasis placed by the College students on the theatrical elements in contrast to the emphasis placed by the University students on the literary elements. Although advances are being made at both institutions to move away from the traditional British approach to the study of literature and although the theatre faculty at both institutions are encouraging the study of oral tradition, improvisation, and the more theatrical elements of African culture, it may be that the theatre faculty at the College is more free to explore these possibilities than are the faculty and students at the University, where the administration is moving away from the British educational system at a much slower pace. It is ony within the last six years, for example, that the Department of Literature at the University has been able to add courses in the study of oral tradition, oral literature, and the literature of African writers and to emphasize the oral and literary heritage of the students enrolled in the literature and theatre programs.

I was able to compare to some extent the theatre activity at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College with the theatre happenings on other campuses by attending the newly established Kenya College Drama Festival. Sixteen schools from the seven provinces of Kenya had entered this first national college festival, and seven of the sixteen were selected to appear in March at the National Theatre in Nairobi. (Unfortunately, the entry which some critics believed to be the best of the seven--i.e., the entry from Kenyatta University College--was not allowed to participate in the

Festival, as the government confined the Kenyatta University College students to their campus that week due to political unrest.)

Of particular interest were the varied kinds of presentations and the various levels of production and performance of these college theatre companies. One of the plays was original; the others were presented from published scripts. Three were presented in English, and the others in Kiswahili. The focus of several of the plays included such social problems as theft, drug addiction, urban renewal, and the conflict between education and traditional religious beliefs. Also included were a revenge drama, a play of revolution (dealing with the Tanzanian freedom fighter Kinjeketile), and a play treating the traditional relationship between the supernatural and family and village life. In all instances the productions were proscenium presentations, and the settings and technical elements were minimized (as might be expected in a touring situation). In addition to these techniques, which were also observed at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College, there was likewise included in the Festival (as on the other two campuses) both published scripted material and original material developed into scripts through the use of improvisation.

The Kenya College Drama Festival was followed at the National Theatre by the Kenya Schools Drama Festival. Started in 1958 by the British-oriented Ministry of Education, the 1975 Schools of Festival had 90 entries, of which 14 competed in Nairobi. In many ways the productions in the Schools Festival were of higher quality than those included in the College Festival. The direction was often more disciplined, the production concepts more innovative, and the technical elements more elaborate and spectacular. These pluses may be due

to better support from the administrations and student bodies of the secondary schools, to a more competitive spirit among secondary school students, to better qualified directors, or perhaps simply to the expertise and confidence gained by experience over a longer period of time (cf. the seventeenth competition for the schools versus the first for the college).

The Schools Festival was also more interesting for other reasons. In addition to plays presented in English and in Kiswahili, there were other tribal languages and dialects represented. In fact, one of the original plays included 12 different dialects. The production styles also varied. Although all used the proscenium stages, several groups used the aisles of the theatre as well, Much more emphasis was placed on the visual effects of setting, costumes, and lighting (although lighting was used more effectively in the National Theatre than at the local level, since most of the schools would not have had lighting equipment available to them).

The subject matter of the plays was also more diversified. There were, of course, the usual domestic plays, stressing love, marriage, and romantic conflict. There were also the plays of social and political realism, emphasizing political freedom (uhuru), national unity (harambee), and the intrigue of election politics. Even more important, however, were the plays which included the fascinating and creative treatment of the personal quest for power, the allegorical treatment of bureaucratic red-tape, and the contemporary adaptation of classical myths. In addition, there was also a more noticeable emphasis on originality, for eleven of the fourteen plays were the result of groups of students working closely with faculty on the development of scripted theatre pieces through the initial use of improvisational techniques. Also apparent in many of the productions were the elements which we often identify with Renaissance theatre: simultaneous settings,

ensemble acting/producing companies, the disregard of the sex of the actor in casting, and the suggestive use of a few set props to portray various locales and situations within the same space.

Especially noteworthy within the Festival was a fascinating and moving production of Love Charm, a Kenyan version of Sophocles' Women of Trachis as adapted and performed by Alliance Girls' High School of Nairobi Province. The winner of the Festival was an original allegory titled Beer for the Gods, which explored in a very imaginative and symbolic way the meaning of poverty, the relationship of rich and poor, and the arrogant and tyrannical suppression of the common man by an overly ambitious rainmaker who became the savior of a small village. At least three of the productions were presented by boys' schools, two of which performed domestic and romantic "tragedies" and one of which included a married couple portrayed as invading European colonialists on safari (in this instance, not only were Mr. and Mrs. Jones both played by males; the Europeans were portrayed by Africans sans whiteface--western clothing versus tribal costumes was the theatrical convention employed to convey the intended differences).

Despite the emphasis on traditional western dramatic forms and traditional western theatrical techniques, the content of the plays was related closely to the family and village life-style from which the students have come and in which they have spent most of their lives. After a week and a half of observing 20 plays representing every province of the country, I felt that I had learned something about some of the important traditions of the Kenyan people. Much of the rest of my stay in Kenya was spent testing this feeling. Through my conversations with students, faculty and other native Kenyans, and by traveling over 10,000 miles through six of the seven provinces of Kenya, I was able to confirm my initial reactions in this regard.

Another basis for comparison and contrast of theatre in Kenya was my contact with the National Theatre Company in Nairobi. Although the first theatre production I saw in Kenya (within a week of my arrival there) was the National Theatre Company's performance of Ibsen's Ghosts, several months passed before I was able to discover the relationship between the National Theatre and the National Theatre Company. Finally, it became clear that the Kenya National Theatre is the theatre located next to the University of Nairobi and across from the Kenya Cultural Centre and the lengendary Norfolk Hotel. In addition to the auditorium and stage house, which are rented for performances by various community theatre groups, the building houses a balcony bar (a pleasant rendevouz for the members of the different theatre companies in and around Nairobi, and a daily "must" for anyone who is trying to become aware of the pulse of Kenyan theatre!), plus the office, workshop, and rehearsal space of the National Theatre Company.

The National Theatre is subsidized by the Kenyan government, and the Director of the Theatre and Theatre Company is a political appointee. This political relationship apparently has not interfered with the programming of the Theatre Company; yet there are some Kenyans who believe that the quality of the productions by the National Theatre Company has suffered because the Director is often chosen for political reasons and not because of his creative talent or artistic expertise.

The Director of the National Theatre Company, in addition to being the chief administrator of the National Theatre, heads the Drama School, holds acting workshops from time to time, and directs several productions each season, usually using actors with whom he has worked in his workshops. The production of Ghosts in February, 1975, was the first European script the Company had ever attempted, and the result was not very satisfactory. The production elements

were unattractive, the blocking was unimaginative, and the acting was uninspired.

Much more interesting and satisfying was the Company's premier production of a new script titled "Betrayal in the City" by the young Kenyan playwright Francis Imbuga. This production interested me especially because I had seen workshop presentations of the first act of the play on the campuses of the University of Nairobi (from which Imbuga had recently graduated) and Kenyatta University College. This full-length production gave me the opportunity not only to see the whole play, but also to compare the quality of the theatre program at the university level with that of the Drama School of the National Theatre Company. My overall impression was that the program of the Drama School could not measure up to that of the University or College, primarily because the Director of the Theatre Company could not match the experience, enthusiasm, creativity of directorial and teaching abilities of the theatre faculty at the other two schools. While some of the acting of the Theatre Company was superior to that of the university students, this superiority was probably the result of the additional experience of the older actors. In many ways the directorial and production elements of the workshop productions at the university level were more effective than the more elaborate, but less pleasing blocking, setting, lighting, and costuming of the National Theatre production.

Of even more significance than these aesthetic and educational considerations, perhaps, was the very fact that the play was performed at all at the National Theatre in May of 1975. Presented at a time when there was considerable tension in Nairobi due to the politically motivated assassination of a popular member of the Kenyan Parliament and to the ensuing suppression of student protest marches and demonstrations, the play in a most provocative way treats the question of

political corruption, military oppression, and the revolution of a people against their government. Through the use of a character who is a playwright and of a play within the play, Imbuga focuses especially on the right and freedom of the creative artist to question the rulers and governmental policies of the society in which he lives. Although the names of places and people are not recognizable, there can be no doubt that Imbuga himself is raising questions about the political situation in his native Kenya. The play could be criticized for being too long, too diffuse, and too didactic at places; the production could be faulted for its acting, directorial and technical flaws; yet, in my opinion, the production was a significant theatre event because it was chosen and produced by the Director of the National Theatre Company at a time when it needed to be seen by the theatre audience of Nairobi. There is no doubt, however, that the event would have had an even greater impact in the hands of a more creative director.

In contrast to the National Theatre Company, there was in Nairobi a small community theatre group called Jaribu Drama and Arts Group, Ltd., whose theatrical and artistic efforts were much more successful. "Jaribu" means "try" in Kiswahili, and the name of the group carries the connotation that here is a theatre group which experiments and is continually interested in attempting something new. Although the group did not have only one artistic director, the director of the production I saw was excellent. She was Janet Young, a Ghanaian who has lived in Nairobi for the past several years and who is a writer and director for the Voice of Kenya educational radio and television networks, and also a fine actress. For Jaribu Ms. Young directed the premier production of a play titled Dedan Kimathi by playwright/critic Kenneth Watene. Written in English, in blank verse, and in the style of Shakespeare, this epic play deals

with one of the important Kenyan heroes of the Mau Mau liberation movement.

The direction of the production was of interest especially because it combined imaginative environmental and epic theatre techniques. Through the use of real bamboo twigs and leaves the small 200-seat auditorium of the Kenya Cultural Centre was transformed into the Kenyan "forest." By bringing these scenic elements through the auditorium to the main entrance of the theatre and by using the main aisle for the characters' entrances and exits, the audience was engulfed by the action. During long narrative portions of the script, imaginative dances and choreographed mime were used to enhance the visual effect and to underscore the thematic comment of the various scenes. In many ways the smallness of the theatre aided the environmental aspects of the production; on the other hand, the epic dimensions of the script and the epic theatre techniques of the director were often hindered by this smallness. In some ways the director needed a larger canvas on which to execute her artistic concepts.

Although the production was well received by the public, a small controversy arose in the local press--a controversy which focused on the script and the playwright. The play was attacked by some because it was modeled on the work of a western playwright. It was attacked by others because it dared to show the foibles of a national hero. Both criticisms are understandable in the context of a country which gained its independence just 13 years ago. From a more objective point of view, however, the strength of the script is found primarily in these three-dimensional elements of characterization, while the chief weakness of the play is the frequent two-dimensional moments, underscored by florid rhetoric and didactic bombast. The acting of the cast was not outstanding, but was on par at least with that of the National Theatre Company and in some instances surpassed the latter. Overall,

this Jaribu production was entertaining and instructive and provided for me additional insights into Kenyan history and culture.

Dedan Kimathi was also produced by another theatre company, which was formed specifically for the purpose of taking a production of the play to the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (which was scheduled for Lagos in November/December 1975, but which had to be cancelled due to the summer coup). This company consisted of members of the National Theatre Company, Jaribu, the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College. Directed by David Mulwa, a dynamic faculty member at Kenyatta University College, a preview of the festival production was held at the Kenyatta Conference Centre in July. Unfortunately, it was not ready for an audience at that time, as it was underrehearsed. Also unfortunate was the vastness of the acting area, the inadequacy of the lighting, and the poor choice of the scenic elements, which--although adequately executed--were so unrealistic they only served to point up some of the two-dimensional aspects of the script discussed above. Although the acting, blocking and technical elements could have been improved over a longer rehearsal period (between July and November, for example), one wonders how successful the finished production would have been, since the scenic concepts raise questions about the overall unity of the production.

During July of 1975, another independent theatre company, called the Inter-African Theatre Group and directed by George Menoe, produced an African version of the Sergel/Rose adaptation of Twelve Angry Men. Although plagued by financial difficulties, plus the lack of adequate rehearsal space and technical support, Menoe gained some support for his project from the United States Cultural Centre in Nairobi, particularly in the securing of scripts and copyright permission

for the production.

As I sat in on rehearsals and observed Menoe at work, I could see he was trying to build an effective ensemble from a fairly inexperienced group of actors. His sense of the mood and rhythms of the piece were quite evident, and by his attention to the nuances of the characters' volatile personalities, he seemed to be achieving his objective. As I saw the final dress rehearsals at the National Theatre, however, it was obvious that the technical and scenic elements were not going to be ready for the opening, and I wondered if the production might not have been more effective played with adequate general lighting against a curtained background. The production opened the night I left Kenya, and I was not able to see the finished piece. In any case, the dynamism and innovative ideas of Menoe must be noted, for this self-exiled South African could become one of the leading directors in Kenya.

One of the most exciting theatre projects I watched develop during April and May was the collaborative premier production of a new rock musical titled Genesis. The book was written by British actor/director/choreographer David Kelsey and American writer Charles Bound, with music by Welsh composer Kendal Davies; the set was designed by Irishman David Beglin; and the cast and crews included black and white Kenyans, Americans, Ugandans, Ghanaians, plus representatives from Holland, India and Polynesia. Not only was the international aspect of the production different from anything else I had seen during my stay in Kenya, but the production itself in every way was the highlight of my theatre experiences and contacts. Although the book lacked the overall compactness and necessary economy of a "hit show", this element could have been corrected over a longer rehearsal period perhaps, or by a director working with the writers on revision;

as it was, Kelsey was directing his own script. The direction of the production, however, was superb. The visual effects of the set, lighting, costumes, make-up, and choreography were spectacular; and the acting company--a unique combination of professionals, semi-professionals, and amateurs--was deftly molded into a polished ensemble by Kelsey's extremely disciplined, yet sensitive artistic genius. The rehearsal period was the most arduous I had seen, the attention to the production and technical elements the most detailed, and the final results the most effective. Genesis was produced by the Nairobi City Players, which is the oldest, most well established, and most prosperous community theatre group in Kenya, and rivalled in its fine productions only by the Donovan Maule Theatre, which is the only commercial and fully professional company in Kenya. The Nairobi City Players were fortunate to have David Kelsey direct four productions during his stay of a year in Kenya. As of June, 1975, Kelsey left Kenya to try to export Genesis to Europe and/or North America; as of this writing, I have not heard about his success or failure in this regard.

On my theatre safari I found that there are also the Donovan Maule Theatre and several other predominantly European community theatre groups in Kenya, including the Mombasa Little Theatre located in the coastal port city on the Indian Ocean; there are the roving international film companies, who employ the Kenyan actors at substandard wages; and there are, as always, the critics--in this case, both Eurpean and Kenyan--who review the happenings of the theatre world for the two daily Kenyan newspapers.

From all the above, it should be quite evident that theatre activity abounds in Kenya (even though most American and Europeans who have lived in Kenya for some time refuse to admit its existence, because in their opinion it does not

measure up to Broadway or London standards!). Most of the Kenyan plays I saw produced dealt either with domestic themes or with important social and political themes which are of current interest to the intelligentsia and which touch the lives of every member of the Kenya milieu. Some dealt with the universal implications of these problems; many were more topical in their treatment of the issues. In many instances--in the productions of schools, colleges and community groups--the emphasis was on the supernatural and the conflict between the old and new forms of religion.

Perhaps most evident in Kenyan theatre are the influences of the British educational system on the Kenyan playwrights, producers, directors, and theatre students. One of the advantageous influences of this academic system may be the more complete and well rounded education of the secondary and college students in the rudiments of traditional western forms and concepts of drama and theatre (and this training in many ways is more sophisticated than what is happening in our own American educational system). Even here, however, the British emphasis is often on dramatic literature rather than theatre art. The distinct disadvantage of the British system of education, on the other hand, has been the stifling of the traditional and innate African forms of theatre. To be sure, there have been attempts within the British system to explore the cultural roots of the students and to relate the study of western theatre to the student's experience with the traditions of African ritual, dance, and religious ceremony. But the emphasis has been on "the study of western theatre." The result has been that this educational approach is making it increasingly difficult for the Kenyans to get back to their own theatrical and dramatic roots, as existent for centuries within the tribal context. Unfortunately for the Kenyan people and for us, there seem to be only a few theatre people who are interested in exploring these radical,

innovative and creative possibilities. It is true that the theatre program at the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University College may begin to take the lead in this regard, depending upon how quickly those preparing to teach in the secondary schools are taught that their oral traditions and traditional rituals are as important to them as the literary classics of the western world. Or the lead may be taken by the Ministry of Education as it moves toward the "Africanization" of its leadership. This change may come very slowly, however, especially since the new leaders will undoubtedly have been brought up within the present system.

Perhaps Kenya will have to look forward to that unknown producer/director who will one day take up the ancient ceremonial mask, and--inspired by the rhythms of the past--will respond to the sound of pipe and drum and nyatiti and lead his followers through the labyrinth of yesterday to a new exciting theatre of tomorrow. If this moment comes, hopefully someone will be there to encourage that theatre artist--"jaribu!"

Dr. P. William Hutchinson, full professor and managing director of theatre at Rhode Island College in Providence, R.I., was on the faculty of Tougaloo College in Mississippi from 19_2-1965. Since moving to Providence in 1968, he has been associated also with the Trinity Square Repertory Company, has served as New England Chairman of the American College Theatre Festival (1973-75), has served on the executive boards of the New England Theatre Conference and the R.I. Alliance for Arts in Education, in 1976 received an ACTF Award of Excellence, and is currently serving on the National Committee of the American College Theatre Festival.